2009

Improvising Chicago

Tamas Dobozy
Wilfrid Laurier University, tdobozy@wlu.ca

Improvising Chicago

Tamas Dobozy, Wilfred Laurier University

Topias of the Writer

"Music," remarks Donna Seamon, "is a key element" in Stuart Dybek's work. "Not only is [Dybek's] writing music," she says, "but music also plays a part in [his] characters' lives, and music is part of the cityscape in which they move" (18). Born in Chicago in 1942, and raised in South Side neighborhoods, Dybek crafts stories and poems that, as the author himself admits, engage with the sounds of the city. It was the "spell of music" that first inspired in Dybek his vision of "unrealistic Chicago" (Seamon 19), one informed by "the folkways" of the many "independent voices of different ethnic and racial backgrounds" (19) the city comprises. Since that first musical moment, Dybek has become one of America's most significant if infrequently published (at least in book form) authors, putting out three collections of short stories and two of poetry since the early 1980s: *Brass Knuckles* (Poems, 1979), *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (Stories, 1980), *The Coast of Chicago* (Stories, 1990), *I Sailed with Magellan* (Stories, 2003), and *Streets in Their Own Ink* (Poems, 2004). Known for mixing gritty realism with the grotesque and fantastical, his pioneering of "flash fiction," his concern with urban Chicago and ethnicity, and his formal innovations with the short story, Dybek has published in many of the most important periodicals, including *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and *TriQuarterly,* among others. He has also had work included among the *New York Times* Notable Books and won the O. Henry, Lannan, PEN/Malamud, Whiting, Rea, and MacArthur Genius awards. His work has been singled out for, among its many accomplishments, its depiction of "the Southwest side of Chicago [. . .] later known as Pilsen and El Barrio, [a] neighborhood [. . .] populated by working-class Poles, Czechs, and Hispanics" (Lee 192).

Dybek addresses the careful negotiations that take place between ethnicity, community, and civic space, negotiations in which improvising with music plays a major role. Here, I use the phrase "improvising *with* music," rather than the standard "improvised music," because Dybek's work is less concerned with the practice of playing an instrument without or in excess of notation than the adaptive use of various musics in a variety of formats and genres—recorded or live, and including classical, jazz, rock 'n roll, or pop—to enable individual and collective agency. It is through these acts of improvisation that Dybek critiques the spaces, conceptual and material, which both constrain subjectivity and allow for unexpected and surprising adaptations and possibilities. In *The Coast of Chicago*, such improvisations are a means of re-conceiving lived conditions within the multi-ethnic neighborhoods of the South Side and, as such, illuminate a vision of community that is utopian. Not utopian in the sense of creating a permanent or perfectly just society, nor transcending the material struggle that is history, but in the sense of turning oppressive civic and political situations, however momentarily, to advantage. Improvising with music becomes one way of enacting possibility.

Dybek himself has frequently cited music in the contexts of aesthetic agency, cultural memory, and civic agency. While there is no mention in research sources of Dybek having personal connections to specific players in Chicago's rich musical legacy—which includes such luminaries as the transplanted Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, and later musicians of avant-garde circles such as the AACM, Ken Vandermark, and Fred Anderson—there is rarely an interview when Dybek does not mention the music that was a constant presence while he was growing up in Chicago: "Jazz was one of the biggest influences for me. In fact, it was probably the thing that got me writing. I frequently write to music, and frequently the music I write to is jazz. I'm always hoping that musical structure will somehow assert itself on fictional structure" (Plath 146).

While I will discuss the contact between "musical structure" and "fictional structure" a little later, the point here is that Dybek's allegiance, and in some ways reliance, on music in his stories is not generalized, but specific to a particular social context of music making in South Side Chicago: "Music was a real avenue out of the area I grew up in. It was an alternative to the prejudices that you were surrounded by, and it was a legitimate way of thinking and feeling that wasn't necessarily academic" (Plath 147). The word "out" in the first sentence suggests escape *and* origin, as if the means for transforming the conditions of one's existence and those conditions themselves were somehow one and the same. This notion of the music of the South Side as offering a transformative "avenue" is in keeping with the findings of historians such as William Holwand Kenney, who see the musical history of the South Side in terms of a "transforming power" (43). For Kenney, Chicago was certainly no inter-racial paradise, as the race riot of 1919 only too clearly demonstrated, but there was nonetheless within the musical scene of the South Side "black-and-tan cabarets [that were] *inclusory* and served to explain and interpret in an essentially reassuring manner the presence of other, exotic, and perhaps dangerous peoples in their midst" (25). Kenney echoes Dybek's comment that music offered a means of reimagining South Side relations, or at least temporarily ameliorating them. Throughout *The Coast of Chicago* this reimagining will take on a utopian cast, one where it is not so much place that changes in order to enable collective relations, but collective relations that restore agency over place.

Being Nowhere

I use the term utopian in a particular context. Early twentieth century theorists such as Ernst Bloch have commented on music as a liminal experience, one peering into potentiality: "By uniting syrinx and nymph, Ovid designated the goal towards which the note-sequence—always a tracing of lines in the invisible—is moving. It is something contradictory and utopian, for this flute-playing constitutes the presence of a vanished entity; that which has exceeded the limit is regained by this lament and contained in this consolation" (197). For Bloch, as for Adorno later, music has the potential to "exceed the limit," to initiate surprise in the sense of over-the-horizon possibilities for which existing conditions, social and cultural, offer little preparation. As Bloch says, "Music originated in yearning and it began very much as a call into what has been forgone"; it is a "sonic dream-wish" (196). Music is the place toward which "yearning" gestures.

Richard Leppert, in his commentary to Adorno's *Essays on Music*, states Adorno's interest in a similar gesture, "marking Adorno's claim that music at heart is utopian: the expression of hope, which seeks to name the philosophical (and spiritual) Absolute that nevertheless is unnameable [. . .] Music is the (concrete) voice of yearning for happiness, which cannot otherwise be directly annunciated, let alone realized" (85-86). This suggests that music is processual, that what it "aims" for is not so much a realization, a goal, as a willingness to admit continual change. It is thus rooted directly in a notion of history as unending, a utopia (in contradistinction to a vulgar Marxism) that is made possible not so much *in* history as *by* history, insofar as history is the action of collective agency transforming social conditions to better meet a volatile material contingency.

Music's revolutionary potential is realized not in some definite place to which it might lead, but in that it continually peers elsewhere. What it offers is attitudinal rather than prescriptive: preparedness for change. "Music aims at an intention-less language, but it does not separate itself once and for all from signifying language, as if there were different realms [. . .] It is only in mimetic practice [. . .] that music discloses itself, never to a consideration that interprets it independent of the act of execution" (114-15). Music, for Adorno, is a "language" that does not defer its meaning into subsequent explanations, as if subordinated to signification, but rather signifies its own doing, where what is embodied is inseparable from the moment and manner of its "execution." It is a process that is its own meaning, and here its utopian possibilities differ from the classical sense of the term as arrival at a perfect place beyond the contingencies that characterize a society "fallen" into history—this process is, literally, a "no place."

Bloch and Adorno conceptualize music as open to a utopia founded in movement, in departure, rather than one which, arriving at the perfect location, abolishes history forever. Utopia, in this sense, is freedom from ultimate meanings and static ideologies. Nonetheless, there remains in Adorno a fixation on class-relations that still differentiates between bodies of music based on tonality as reification and naturalization of exploitative economic relations, which, in suggesting what music should turn away *from*, also suggests what it should turn *toward*, and thus preserves the utopian in its relation to a site. This makes it difficult for Adorno to advocate for music that is "popular," including much of early twentieth century jazz, which, despite elements of improvisation, or in fact because of them, involved "musical techniques" that being "principally borrowed from classical music of the nineteenth century" were "in fact exhausted" (Leppert 335).

Insofar as Adorno saw improvisation not as a critical musical practice, or one involved with a complete break with bourgeois norms of music making, it did not lend itself to his utopian vision. There was no revolutionary potential in recombining the "old," only the break that was the "new." Likewise, popular music, because it served existing mass taste, could not lend itself to the utopian impulse, since it always ended up satisfying and thus reconfirming existing social norms: "Adorno insists on the social power of popular music, while arguing that this power acts regressively" (Leppert 335). In other words, nothing "new" can emerge from the practice of improvisation as Adorno here understands it, partly because the utopian is seen not in terms of practice itself but only in terms of an aim or goal. The problem, then, is in regarding improvisations as a means toward an end, in continuing to demand an engagement with history only in the interests of an exit from it. It is precisely improvisation's "making do" with musical elements that come to hand, whether they arrive from the classical, jazz, or pop traditions, that troubles Adorno's analysis. Thus, the ghost of the site-specific utopia continues to haunt Adorno's thinking, and obscures the engagement with temporality at the heart of improvisation.

Taking up this problematic of place in utopia, Caryl Flinn, in her study, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music,* articulates the utopian not in terms of an ahistorical place (by which I mean one freed, in a prelapsarian sense, from struggle with material contingency), but as something "fleeting and partial," as "ways of putting the practices of everyday life to different and unexpected ends" (92). Utopia is, for Flinn, instantiated within the temporary itself, a way of recovering agency (however evanescent) in the midst of history, rather than on the other

side of it. Utopian practice no longer holds to the naive assumption of overcoming history as Marx defines it (and which is already so distant, though ideologically retained, in Bloch and Adorno): "the co-operative action of all mankind," labor, in relation to material conditions, is the manifestation, or "result of[,] history" (118). Instead, it is precisely the denial of permanent positions, whether of the subject, the city, or the nation-state, that permits the realization of agency. The recognition of change and adaptation vis-à-vis material circumstance is necessary for facing history rather than dwelling in the notion that, since human beings and societies are governed by powers that are timeless, nothing we can do within history will ever affect them. The provisionality of Flinn's utopia is both its liability and strength, since the very fact that permanent gains cannot be made—change is inevitable and necessary—also creates a way of everyday living that is responsive, elastic, adaptable, and suited to survival in the rapidly disintegrating civic culture of places such as Chicago's South Side.

Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* suggests a productive way of thinking through the problematic posed by Flinn's utopian placelessness: "The taking-place of things does not take place in the world. Utopia is the very topia of things" (103). "Topia" or "place" is thus predicated on "placelessness"; arrival at "the taking-place of things" or the temporal appearance of phenomena is no arrival at all but rather a constant departure, a continual leaving behind of the notion of "place," the fixed sites of established meanings and programmatic practices for endless movement itself—the very gesture that is improvisation. For Agamben, the possibility of utopia, and thus a community in which being is no longer confined to instrumental categories (the "placing" of the other into class, race, gender), arrives with the absence of the "topia" ascribed to phenomena by a language that determines and polices definitive presence, that puts things in "their place." In other words, Agamben suggests that "place" is an instrumental determination, positing the "world" in terms of established sites of meanings, and, by extension, uses. Thus utopia becomes, in his theorizing, an over-the-horizon emergence of "things" from instrumental categories (and thus place). Agamben wants us to think of presence as a "being-thus," as a "rather" (105) in other words as that which, always on the edge of relational determination, is instead liminal, external to localized or confined being: "(What is astonishing is not that something was able to be, but that it was able to not not-be.)" (104). Thus, subjectivity is neither opposition to non-being (negation), nor arrival at presence (being), but rather the figure of a double negation: "to not not-be," a participation in the world that is an indefinite definite, an opening whose condition of possibility is its relation to meaning without being confined to it. This "not not-being" seems to me the closest approximation of the utopian subjectivity evident in Dybek: where utopia is process rather than place, and subjectivity a continual edging on meaning that is only ever provisional. Utopia is thus the arrival at an "irreparable" world, one that exists outside of any economy of redemption (religious or political), experienced without subordination to the violence of a plan of completion or perfection.

This notion dovetails with Dybek's treatment of characters in suggesting a subjectivity *as* or *of* improvisation, a subjectivity continually emerging from or in excess of categorical determinants (whether they be civic citizenship, ethnicity, social class). Like Agamben and Flinn, Dybek sees the possibilities inhering in topias not projected into a distant future by a monolithic history-conquering ideology. Rather, a dispositional adjustment, a change in attitude, permits one entry into a "taking-place" in which the world is emergent rather than fixed, and in which utopia is thus an engagement with the present as possibility rather than the subordination of the present to (or substitution of the present by) a distant singular and finite goal. To return briefly to Adorno, it is precisely the vestiges of past "sites" of meaning—in this case past examples of music-making, popular or otherwise—that, because they are vestiges within the overall ensemble of the improvisation, permit us to glimpse the fusion of the old and the new in the emergence of a given moment of individual or collective agency.

Thus, the traditional notion of utopia, which imagines a state of pre- or post-historical social perfection, is at odds with the transformative potentiality witnessed in the post-structuralist utopianism of Agamben and Flinn:

> earlier [Marxist] advocacy of wholeness and totality [. . .] whether as an international communist movement, a projected historical finitude, the harmony of technology and nature, subject-object relations, and so on [is what Flinn is arguing against]. The term wholeness itself has come [to] be considered as tainted, an idealization, or as an element of false consciousness. When employed at all, it often tends to refer to a condition beyond the range of capitalist influence either as a harmonious, fully integrated social condition that supposedly preceded capitalism or one that will emerge with capitalism's withering away. Of the two, the former enjoys greater currency, and it is into this nostalgic setting that Marxist critics place much of their own work on music. (Flinn 74)

And the utopian potential of music, if it is to be realized in the context of community activism and civic agency, must abandon precisely these notions of "wholeness and totality," since they stand in the way of recognizing that history is exitless: there will always be (and always has been) the necessity of collective agency (as demanded by material contingency), and thus always a social aspect to existence, understood in the sense of one or another structuring form of *relations*, though also understood in the sense that these are always only *possible* relations, at once

necessary *and* contingent, and that grasping this is precisely what enables community to revise its relation to circumstance. The utopian is thus a grasping of the old and the new in one figure. More importantly it is the attitude that results from this knowledge, a radical openness vis-à-vis the relations made possible by necessity that features so prominently, as we shall see, in Dybek.

Here, community is less a thing—a body constituted by law, tradition, cultural markers—than a doing, a disposition or attitude—taking given materials and turning them to use in improvisatory style, an openness to possibilities foreclosed by the segregation of civic planning. Such a community, described in Thomas Carl Wall's commentary on Agamben, "is the one paradoxically 'constituted' or 'instituted' by expropriation [. . .] this community has no being proper to it except for its (para)transcendental bordering on all its possibilities" (156). In the term "expropriation" we have the figure of a community in which any relation to the material manifestation (place) is only a possible relation, only one of the actions through which that community might be made visible, and which thus finds its "visibility" in paradoxically not having a specific aspect: "That which is offered us is always the Same: not an essence, a shining path, nor a destiny, but the sheer possibility of relation *in general*—a dice throw" (162). For Wall, Agamben's politics are manifest not in particular applications of relational discourse, but in relation "in general," in possibility itself. The city, then, with its concrete particulars, works in Dybek to illuminate how community appears according to the places that condition the materials it can always use *differently* to articulate and empower itself.

It is in this sense that improvisation becomes important in Dybek, since communities denied institutional autonomy (in the way governments, corporations, educational centers have space, resources, and means all their own) must make use of materials supplied *to* rather than *by* or even *for* them. The jukebox is a frequent example of this in Dybek, such as in the story "Blight," where a specific ensemble of recordings, commodities controlled by the jukebox distributor, provide the available ensemble of sounds for customers. These not only control and confine pleasure in the limited choices of background music, but also memory: "I made the rounds of some of the bars looking for his song on the jukeboxes, but when I couldn't find it even in the Carta Blanca, where nothing else had changed, I gave up" (70). Looking for his friend's song, the narrator ends up at the appropriately named "Carta Blanca," the "white letter" or blank slate, where he finds that memory of Deejo has been erased from the official list of songs even in a place "where nothing else had changed," suggesting an environment controlled by commercial interests, whose static surface masks the powerlessness of its inhabitants to maintain memory and community. This twin nightmare, however, in which "everything [is] at once familiar and strange" (71), is undermined, for a moment, by "the bells from three different churches tolling the hour," bells that don't "agree on the precise moment" and thus "[overlap] and [echo] one another" (71). In this failure of institutional authority to keep time the narrator recovers the "dream" of another place "like the Carta Blanca" that, unlike the urban "blight" that characterizes his neighborhood, is an "Official *Blithe* Area." (71, my emphasis).

The arbitrariness of the church bells serves to undermine institutional timekeeping, or official history, and thus foregrounds the artificiality and colonizing memory enforced by the jukebox. In the expropriation signified by the bells, the narrator's relationship to his community is temporarily renewed, since it denaturalizes oppressive authority. In this moment blight gives way to the blithe, to a dream of a place where what is written on the slate of memory is what institutional music making leaves out. "Official Blithe Area" is likewise an ironic wresting of the "official" from civic authority, since the narrator's sudden bliss cannot in any way institute itself except as a dream counter to reality as it is on the ground. In either case, he makes the music of the bells work for him and his collective, rather than for the institution it supposedly serves.

Thus, as Michel de Certeau has suggested, the movements of common citizens within matrices of power (such as the layout of the city, which intends to control movement and use, or a text, which assumes that a reader will read every word of every sentence of every page in the order in which it is presented) is near infinite, turning such matrices into empty forms enabling operations that completely exceed them:

> The language produced by a certain social category has the power to extend its conquest into vast areas surrounding it, “deserts” where nothing equally articulated seemed to exist, but in doing so it is caught in the trap of its assimilation by a jungle of procedures rendered invisible to the conqueror by the very victories he seems to have won. However spectacular it may be, his privilege is likely to be only apparent if it merely serves as a framework for the stubborn, guileful, everyday practices that make use of it. (32)

In Dybek, musical improvisation becomes a metaphor for exactly this kind of "use," in which the utopian moment is often realized by expropriation and appropriation together, by a denaturalization of means (for instance, in a writing, such as Dybek's, that demonstrates its *misappropriation* of music) that in turn enable variousness itself rather than a particular end—the musical realization of what was never *meant* to supply rhythm, harmony, or melody. The church

bells in the example above, meant to mark time, instead supply a counter-time, restoring historicity, the narrator's particular temporal reality, against the Christian teleology. Perhaps not an example of "music making" in the strict sense—though there are plenty of such examples to follow—this is nonetheless a demonstration of how Dybek's narrators use music in ways completely contrary to their intended purpose. In Certeau's sense, then, this is improvisation—the transformation of given materials, in this case the music of jukeboxes and church bells, in highly particularized ways, in contexts so microscopic they cannot be preempted by institutional planning.

Like the "everyday practices" described by Certeau, Dybek's text traces the way in which "stubborn" and "guileful" characters turn their expropriation (of material space, of inviolable communities and neighborhoods and ethnic enclaves, of financial resources, of secure ethnic identifications, of the means to represent their own experience within the city) into possibility, demonstrating that because authority is not natural things can be done differently, realizing a mobility in their detachment from static meanings and uses. What is revealed, then, as in the case of the narrator at the end of "Blight," is that improvisation begins in an awareness of the near infinite possibilities made available by a fusion of the old and the new.

Dreams of Chicago

Like Michael Borshuk, I think that Dybek's treatment of the city, in this case Chicago, suggests that it is "never a knowable, 'real' space but rather a cultural phenomenon" (109). While Borshuk's critique focuses on Detroit, on the ways in which civic authority polices or maintains control over representations of the city, and the ways in which aesthetic strategies disclose this "always representational" aspect (and thus subvert or confound power), my interest is in the ways that Dybek's characters transform lived urban space by the improvisatory relation to material conditions. This transformation, however, has as much to do with civic authority and resistance to it as it does with representation.

Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* explores this intersection of the materiality of civic space and collective agency: "One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people, and like memory it is associated with objects and places [. . .] The collective memory participates in the actual transformation of space in the works of the collective, a transformation that is always conditioned by whatever material realities oppose it" (130). In line with the Marxist notion that history is the work of the collective vis-à-vis changing material conditions, Rossi argues that civic space is at once determiner of and determined by the collective that inhabits it. There is no straightforward origin to be ascribed to the communal experience of the city, neither an *a priori* "memory" nor an *a priori* set of "material realities," but always a dialectical relationship between the two. The city is understood as a field in which space and citizenry participate equally in the determination of possible futures. In other words, material reality does exert deterministic force on a population but that population also has a capacity to imaginatively take on this force with an abundance of possibilities disposed of, cordoned off, or relegated to the impossible. Agency resides, and is enabled by, the memory of what the city once was in prefiguring the possibilities for what the city might yet be. If the city was once another way, then that memory can be leveraged to transform it yet again, to keep it, in the sense of Agamben's community, always aware of the "rather," expropriated of any determinate relation to circumstance. This liminal position makes possible the utopian condition Flinn identifies, where utopia must be located *in the midst of history*, fully cognizant of the variety of social relations, and thus regarding the utopian as a working principle rather than ultimate salvation or redemption. It is this situation—in the midst of possibilities with which Dybek's characters must improvise and through which they grasp their agency—that avoids subordination to an impersonal end logic.

This notion is paralleled in the quote from Antonio Machado that opens *The Coast of Chicago*: "Out of the whole of memory, there's one thing worthwhile: the great gift of calling back dreams." It is not just a question of remembering how the city once was, but of remembering what the city was once *envisioned* as being, the dream of other cities. Dreams are an apt metaphor since they already suggest the unattainable, a place apart from material conditions. At the same time they make possible a way of thinking that reality apart from economic and social conditions that might be so longstanding, so firmly entrenched, as to be regarded as one with the fabric of reality itself, fully naturalized, with all the appearance of the incontrovertible. Dreams—what the city once was, what else it is, what it might be—have the dual function of de-naturalizing the status quo and also promising new ways of working within and with available space.

Musical improvisation is important here since in Dybek it becomes one instance of the material practice of dreaming, at once a playing on the past (with given musical means) and an attempt to "play" it otherwise (to make it sound different), or under a new dispensation (the way it's *not supposed to be* played). In the story, "Chopin in Winter," Dybek describes the use of a piano for something other than music: "I could feel it in my teeth and bones as the deep notes rumbled through the ceiling and walls like distant thunder. It wasn't like listening to music, yet [. . .] I would notice Dzia-Dzia close his eyes, a look of concentration pinching his face as his body swayed [. . .] I wondered what

he was hearing" (13). Here, what the piano communicates is not "music," but a music as yet unheard, as yet misapprehended, by the narrator, despite its effect on his uncle, Dzia-Dzia. What the piano forces the narrator to do is to "wonder" beyond his expectations, both of music, and his own claims to cultural forms, as well as memory itself—what, in his past, his grandfather is reacting to or dreaming of. In this sense, dreams work to envision reality "otherwise." In many of the stories this "otherwise" not only recalls an "otherness" (cultural and historical) beyond prior representations, but also neighborhoods demolished by city planning, memorializing what once existed on the South Side, and also, and through that, what might be, against all odds, salvaged in the way of inter-ethnic community from the destruction all around. Through this music, destroyed places become habitable.

Contrapuntal Storytelling

This place between, straddling reality and dream, bringing together irreconcilables, is suggested in the technique of the collection itself, which moves between short vignettes, or flash fictions, and longer more traditionally structured short stories. For Dybek this technique is derived from his interest in music, at the same time as it speaks to his vision of Chicago: "I could have a sequence: an unrealistic [story], a realistic [story], an unrealistic [story], a realistic [story]" (Seamann 17). The interplay of "unrealistic" and "realistic" suggests exactly the liminality, the return to potentiality, the willingness to court the impossible, that we have already seen in Adorno and Bloch's treatment of music, and Agamben's meditation on utopia. It also turns Chicago into precisely that no-place Rossi and the Machado quotation suggest, one always poised on the threshold of a transformative potential, of a visionary leap into the impossible, the unthought-of, the unreal. Making the connection between this oscillation and music more explicit, Dybek suggests that this visionary technique is based in the musical notion of "counterpoint":

> I was very aware of how important counterpoint is in music, but it never really occurred to me before that it was a tremendously important mechanism [. . .] to create compression and resonance. That when you take two things that are unlike and you put them side by side, a current jumps between them, as in positive and negative, and that this current is often what the reader supplies where there is silence. So the reader is participating in bringing these two things together, and what's happening is that stuff is getting said that you haven't had to write in language [. . .] So the counterpoint in *The Coast of Chicago* became the counterpoint between the little vignettes and the longer stories. (17-18)

Dybek's structure of "counterpoint" is inspired by music, and brings together the antithetical in order to effect "compression and resonance," in other words to create not-yet-discursive meaning. The "current that jumps" between these two modes—the realistic and the unrealistic—is characterized by "silence," that which the writer himself doesn't "have to" write in his language, that cannot be written, since it invites the reader's participation, which suggests a host of near-infinite meanings, interpretations, and possible "languages." Dybek is attempting precisely what Adorno identifies in the utopian potential of music, namely a signification that resists specific meaning, that points to an otherness it never quite instantiates, the possibility of signification itself as a utopian "opening" rather than "space," and which thus restores our agency in rethinking our relation to the material real. This opening suggests a process that, always presenting another opening, never allows the reification of meaning. Dybek's work thus not only references music but references its structure to enable an open-ended signification. In this sense, his writing of music is considerably different from those American works that have tried to fuse music with literary language.

David Yaffe suggests, in *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing*, that most (though not all) American fictions invoking jazz techniques do so not literally, within the structure of the writing itself, but as metaphors, whether in the case of male envy (41), race relations (17), or an existential "refuge" (146), among others. Only rarely, Yaffe's text suggest, do actual musical elements become intrinsic to the movement of the writing itself, as in the case of Yusef Komunyakaa's poetry (149). By contrast, Travis A. Jackson suggests that collaborations between jazz musicians and poets witness the jazz tradition "as a process, an act of struggle and creative adaptation [. . .] [drawing] our attention to the collective power of different people and musical styles brought into an open collaborative space" (369).

Dybek's work, I argue, is poised somewhere between these two notions, where music does serve as a metaphor for certain utopian processes but only insofar as it is cannot be appropriated by writing, insofar as writing cannot *be* music, drawing our attention to what happens, what kind of "space" (Jackson's argument is close to my own in calling it an "opening") is enabled when two incommensurable artistic mediums are attempted to be phased together in "counterpoint." Thus, the writing is a playing on the playing of music, a kind of improvisation with musical material (much as Dybek's characters improvise with various formats and genres of music), in which musical techniques, explicitly or implicitly referenced, instantiate the "current" that, in demonstrating expropriation, makes us attentive to "the collective power of different people," the various means by which various dreams are recalled, the "silence" of difference resulting in different meanings for the urban space of the South Side.

The question is therefore not whether music is used properly (if such a thing is even possible) in Dybek's writing but how that use opens on otherness, that rich "silence" to the other side of established and official representations. Music, in Dybek, thus recalls the ethnic lifeways the city obscures. The disruption of the real by this jumping "current" that permits a sounding of the "silence" of impossibilities is established by a writing that cannot be music, but which, in reaching for it, refuses to settle into what is—into the power of writing itself to appropriate, to speak for, to consolidate what can and is permitted to be done. Instead, Dybek's writing wanders into phantom cities, whose sounds he recovers as the inaudible, as silence, as the impossibility of a text to become music, which, in turn, allows his stories to reach, within themselves, toward something other than text.

Into the Underworld

In the most visionary and anti-realistic story in the collection, "Nighthawks," Dybek recalls phantom cities that exist parallel with present-day Chicago. Divided into nine vignettes thematically connected, the story deals with silhouettes, night, absences, silence. Here, each drop of rain "encases its own separate note" (113) as if the city were an instrument in which innumerable singularities nonetheless sound out together, and because of which it is "impossible" to "tell who is a shadow of whom" (113). Origins are lost in labyrinths of play that are simultaneously scenes of atomization and collective awareness. Because they are simultaneously so the music suggests that atomization and collectivity need not be thought of antithetically, that the preservation of one might be the preservation of another. This quasi-utopian notion echoes that given jazz improvisation by Ralph Ellison, where the musician in the midst of group improvisation asserts his selfhood even as he recognizes the necessary context of that assertion being the collective improvisation of the group: "For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group" (234). In other words, the preservation of the individual and the collective requires the abandonment of origins, or rather a recognition that origins are not to be thought of in sequential fashion but as circuitous and ever evolving. "Because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it" (234).

The origin of the individual is the group and of the group the individuals, in this way making interaction or process the central tenet of the collective rather than adherence to a fixed or immutable authority that precedes and overrides it. It is yet another way of saying that history is both the field of social action and a consequence of it. In keeping with Agamben, utopia is not the realization of an ideal, but the deals required for any realization. It is precisely by recognizing, and keeping at the forefront, the interactive and improvisatory aspect of dealing with material reality that it is possible to think both the individual and the collective at the same time, rather than effacing or subsuming one in the interests of the primacy of the other. Here utopia is precisely "no place" because it is not concerned with condition but with practice.

In one of the vignettes in "Nighthawks," "Transport," Dybek recasts the story of Orpheus via a "*congacero*," a young Afro-Cuban conga drummer (105). Descending along an escalator to the land of the dead, the *congacero* realizes that, "His drum shapes silence into time, keeping time where there is none to keep. Time is his song and his power" (106). Time in the city is controlled by the *congacero*'s capacity to control rhythm. However, his beats collide with the material reality of the city and his personal desire, and his frenzied rhythm makes him "forget" not only the "street" and his "street sense" (106) but also the necessity of honoring Eleguá, "the trickster, Master of Doors and Crossroads" (107), a Yoruban deity associated, among other things, with cities. It is no accident that street sense and a collective memory of ancestral customs are conflated. As David H. Brown tells us, "The ritual use of space in Afro-Cuban religions [. . .] particularly in heterogeneous and condensed urban settings, blurs distinctions between 'sacred' and 'profane'" and thereby produces a religious practice that is as "practical" as it is spiritual (158). Important here is that the *congacero* is able to function in the city, he is able to confront its temporality, only as long as that space retains for him a relation to ancestral customs and beliefs, albeit those adapted to, and thus to some degree possessing power over, civic space in its present manifestation.

What Brown suggests is that civic space is made functional by cultural memory, in this case that of Afro-Cuban religion, so that two cultural spaces—that of the west (suggested by the Orpheus myth), and that of Africa (suggested by Eleguá)—do not so much intersect as merge (in the fashion of Brown's "syncretic" religions) and, in merging, morph into another kind of space altogether, one in which present and future necessity are navigable via the past. Thus, for Brown, important aspects of community life—"ceremonies of initiation and sacrifice" (167), "incorporation into the community" (167)—deform and appropriate civic spaces for the purposes of a customized continuity, personalizing the secular spaces of cities such as New York—whose very streets seem a kind of civic technology for the circulation of capital—for the purposes of another "dream" entirely: "The 'crossroads' of Eleguá for one New York priestess is represented by the intersections that form her Manhattan block of 56th Street, between 11th and 12th Avenues" (169).

Civic formations can stand in for the hills, oceans, streams, dirt paths that were at one time the necessary sites for the enactment of ancestral customs. Cities are in this way a locus of a relational differentiation, evidence of a geographical remove, the loss of a rich past, at the same time as they serve as the means of preserving and renewing it. For diasporic communities, such as that of the *congacero*, cities are at once the scene of erasure—cultural and historical—and of recovery. Even here, Eleguá appears both in a traditional and transfigured context, since his power as "mediator" ferrying "messages and sacrifices between God, the *orichas*, the dead, and human beings" (Brown 174) is both literal and figurative. The dead, in this case, are not so much ancestral customs but the ancestors themselves, since it is clear that religion—especially the syncretic religions of the Afro-Cuban diaspora—is less an adherence to a specific creed and ritual practiced in an unchanging space than a dialogue with those who once practiced such rituals similarly but differently—the advent, in other words, of Agamben's *always* relational. The *congacero's* religion is practice itself, improvisatory insofar as it is not religious formality that pre-emptively determines its practices but the religious practitioners who adjust those formalities depending on the spaces and circumstances in which they find themselves. The dialogue with the dead is at once recognition of necessary practices and an assertion of necessary departures from them.

The threat of erasure/promise of renewal is played out in Dybek's story. When the *congacero*'s love appears he leads her out, knowing that if his beat is "disrupted for even a moment they will be lost" (108). This suggests the importance of measuring and keeping track of time as a way of managing the future. But nearing the surface he loses the beat in the multiplication of echoes created by the subway tunnels and time is "shattered" (109). In that moment the *congacero* realizes it was his lover who summoned him, rather than the other way around, and she now leads him "deeper into the twisting passageways" (109). The realization is significant, because the *congacero,* unlike Orpheus, is or is not rescued by the dead, rather than the other way around. In this version of the story, it is the dead who have agency rather than the living, and the relationship of the dead to the living determines one's present well being in the city. In connecting the *congacero*'s forgetfulness in properly honoring the dead with Eleguá, Dybek suggests that cities are habitable insofar as they are brought into "time" via a respecting of religious, social, and cultural practices ascribed to community, at the same time as those practices are responsible not only to tradition but to the present context, since it is the *congacero*'s inability to sustain his drumming amidst the subway tunnels that leads to his disappearance from history into the land of the dead.

Recognizing difference, our being as always poised on the edge of relation, enables the adaptation that is key for survival, for it is here that agency resides, where the past becomes not a determiner of subjectivity but a reservoir to be honored and drawn from without losing sight of where one happens to be. In other words, civic space, the city, must also be honored, for while it is no more deterministic, it must be put to use in a way that is mindful of what it offers and withholds. Civic space can fit community need provided that community does not lose sight of the ways in which it has adapted to it. This is the salient lesson of improvisation that the congacero episode foregrounds: that the improviser must keep in mind not only what *is* improvised, but what he is improvising *with*. Whether one is improvising with a song or tune, a religious practice, or a civic edifice, one must, as Dybek suggests, be responsible to and cognizant of the origins of one's materials.

Unable to see that his personal concerns are evoked by collective crisis—he is summoned by the dead, not the other way around—the *congacero* loses himself in a city no longer marked or mapped out by community associations. In this sense, the city becomes maze-like, unreadable, no longer a space lived in but the Hades of the Orpheus myth, the land of the dead. Unlike Orpheus the *congacero* doesn't enter and depart from the underworld but is always already there, unless he can mobilize memory to make the place habitable, to bring the dead to life. This is the challenge posed to Dybek's own art—to demonstrate the ways in which death and life can themselves enable a process of recovery, rather than as concepts of a static opposition that prevent anything but individual isolation within the disorientation of contemporary urban space. The story, aptly entitled "Transport"—safe passage from one place to the next, but also suggesting ecstasy or rapture—dwells on the importance of memory, ritual, and collectivity in the improvisatory process of adapting to changes in civic space.

The Cities Within Mayor Daley's City

This "transport" follows throughout the collection. It is in music that Dybek locates the most forceful articulation of a transformative utopian impulse:

> When I grew up on the southwest side, the two biggest landmarks on most every corner were a church or a tavern. I would be walking down, let's say 25th street, which would represent ordinary reality [. . .] made up by bread trucks delivering bread, people going to work, kids playing on the sidewalk, women hanging wash and so on. But by just stepping through either one of those doorways, the tavern or the church, it

> seemed [. . .] you entered a different world. In the tavern you entered a world that moved to a different time. The time it moved to was whatever song was on the jukebox [. . .] People told stories and behaved in ways that they would never behave on the street. The church was the same thing. By just entering its doors you [. . .] [entered] the medieval ages [. . .] What I look for as a writer in stories are those doorways in which somebody leaves ordinary reality and enters some kind of extraordinary reality. (Nickel and Smith 88)

Here, in keeping with Rossi, various spaces preserve various realities, the awareness of which enables alternative habitations, the preservation of various lifeways. The city becomes navigable for Dybek insofar as he can recover these various cities. Most important is Dybek's identification of different kinds of "time" with music. The songs on the jukebox preserve "a different time," or alternate histories, which in turn allow "behavior" not possible in ordinary reality—so that here the jukebox, in contrast to its depiction in "Blight," can also be used to wrest personal and collective memory from the corporations that preformat its playlists. Like the churches at the end of "Blight," then, the jukebox is both emblematic of authority and its subversion, suggesting Dybek's acknowledgement that there is no life apart from the material manifestations of institutions, although those manifestations can be both confining and liberating depending on context and individual or collective response. Music, then, becomes a visionary aspect of Dybek's stories, if not a utopian practice, since it permits alternatives to an otherwise inescapable reality. For Dybek is not just interested in preservation, a static undertaking, but in openings to what is yet to be realized, the extraordinary.

It is not just the static playlists on the jukeboxes that serve as metaphors for such musical openings, nor the discordance of church bells that disclose the arbitrariness of official time and thus history, that inform Dybek's take on music in *The Coast of Chicago*. These are, after all, means of awareness, which is only the first step toward agency. As is evident in the story of the *congacero*, and as will be evident in the further discussion of "Blight" to follow, the city itself becomes an instrument played upon, improvised with, in order to activate the collective memory that helps various groups resist material conditions, in this case the demolition of South-side neighborhoods and segregation of ethnic, especially African American, populations undertaken by the Mayor Daley's administration in the 1950s and 1960s. Here, Dybek's concern is less the preservation of ethnicity than mobilizing experience, particularly deracination, to proactive ends, envisioning what Thomas S. Gladsky calls "trans-ethnic urban America [. . .] a diverse cultural landscape where ethnicity transcends national origins but remains vital" (117). Dybek's tackling of the future with the transformative power of the past serves not to preserve origins and traditions—most of his second- and third-generation characters are well on their way to losing their ethnic identity—but to retain the ability to face transformation and uncertainty (in other words the capacity for improvisation) that is part of the immigrant experience. It is less a question of his characters becoming American than of America as a becoming. For Gladsky, Dybek's ethnic self is a processual subjectivity, "based [less] on national origins [than] on a shared sense of ethnicity as a condition of Americanness" (115). An ethnicity unmoored from "national origins" and "shared" suggests an operating principle or a disposition rather than a content, a desire to belong, an uprootedness, a sense of having come from away, which combine to create an elastic and responsive attitude to the pressures of place. Moreover, because definite origins and fixed ethnic identities are not part of the equation, there is an attitude toward otherness that is open rather than pre-determined, so that otherness appears in the moment of its experience rather than as a preemptive category. Because identity is always transformative and unfixed, what emerges from meeting the other is the difference between the possibilities of otherness and what material, cultural, and political circumstances have *made* of the other. Community is not just a question of dreaming the city but also of dreaming the other, and selfhood an ongoing act of improvisation.

In the story "Blight" characters inhabit a neighborhood where "the city was tearing down buildings for urban renewal and tearing up streets for a new expressway, and everywhere one looked there were signs in front of the rubble reading: "SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE / ANOTHER IMPROVEMENT / FOR A GREATER CHICAGO / RICHARD J. DALEY, MAYOR" (44). As the story's title suggests "urban renewal" is done for the purposes of speeding people through neighborhoods via an expressway rather than "renewing" their relationship with it. Ironically, this demolition of monuments, this assault on what Rossi calls "the Locus" ("a relationship between a [. . .] specific location and the buildings that are in it" 103), this demonstration of the materiality of civic space, reawakens the characters to community, to the difference between the Locus (the space as we inhabit it) and the civic structures it did, does, or could comprise: "It was the route we usually took to the viaduct, but since blight had been declared we were trying to see our surroundings from a new perspective" (45). The "route" the characters take is the opposite of the "way" that will be made possible by the new expressway—one taken slowly, on foot, rather than gliding above the civic "improvement," figured here as the absence and destruction of Daley's "greater Chicago." The "inconvenience" caused by the construction releases the characters from the functionalist convenience that guides city planning, a relationship so naturalized, so usual, it seems a given. They become the civic subjects, suggested by Certeau, whose customizing of space instantiates a near-infinity of doings that are "otherwise" than the processes foreseen by instrumental powers. Soon, they will begin to "use" the city to ends other than those intended by planners,

improvising music literally out of the objects made available by demolition.

The renovation of functional routes in the city makes Dybek's characters realize how civic authority conditions the reality they inhabit, and by doing so, frees them from accepting their place in it as necessarily so or natural. Arriving at the viaduct off Douglas Park the boys begin improvising a "blues" by "slamming an aerial or board or chain off the girders, making the echoes collide and ring [. . .] clonk[ing] empty bottles and beer cans [. . .] shouting and screaming like [. . .] Howlin' Wolf" (48). They are joined by "a train [. . .] booming overhead like part of the song" (48) and by "a gang of black kids" at the other end of the viaduct who stand "harmonizing from bass through falsetto just like the Coasters, so sweetly that though at first [the characters] tried outshouting them, [they] finally shut up and listened, except for Pepper keeping the beat" (48). The fragments of the city—its structures ("girders"), trash ("bottles"), and even infrastructure (the train "booming" overhead)—are improvised with to enable a raucous collectivity, not just by the Polish and Chicano boys, but also the African Americans whose distance from them is enforced by the viaduct, which, instead of a means of separation, becomes the medium, the auditorium, through which the song resounds.

Here, the role of musical improvisation in Dybek is most clearly articulated: it serves as a metaphor for taking the given, material elements of the city (girders, trash, train, viaduct), and transforming them into a means of reconceiving what those conditions make possible—a sense of that Locus different from those regulated by civic structures (demolished or not) and where community agency resides. The attempt of civic authority to wrest memory from its inhabitants by controlling access, speed, and perception gives way to a scene of salvage, and thus potentiality, that restores agency. If the city is not "the given" in the sense of a natural condition then it can be "the taken," and the two communities become aware of their ability to redefine landscape, to alter "perspective," to take possession of space, as if out of material destruction it might be possible to make of memory something more than memorization. The music they create overrides the spaces that cordon off the musicians, foreclose on communication, and regulate practice. Unlike the *congacero* they are able to realize who summons them, the past, and by doing so orient themselves toward the future. Dybek's understanding of improvisation as a social practice is the crafting of unforeseen relations out of pre-emptive limits.

Conclusion: Chopin's Silence

"Chopin in Winter" deals with a first-generation Polish woman, Marcy, who becomes pregnant with a black man's child, christened Tatum Kubiac. It goes even further than "Blight" in illuminating Dybek's interest in transformative potential. As in "Blight" Marcy's piano playing—alternating between "boogie-woogie music" and Chopin—brings together communities without annulling differences, or, more accurately, suggests that difference is itself the means to create community, since it makes obvious a variety of possible relations to the real, out of which emerges a sense of agency—if relations can be different they can also be otherwise, new combinations can be improvised. This is precisely what happens when Marcy, who becomes a pariah in the community, moves out of the rooming house for a "Negro neighborhood" (33) in New York: "When the music finally disappeared, its channels remained, conveying silence. Not an ordinary silence of absence and emptiness, but a pure silence beyond daydream and memory, as intense as the music it replaced, which, like music, had the power to change whoever listened" (33). Here, Dybek's utopian impulse connects music to a realization that is beyond both dream and memory, or, more accurately, beyond the dreams and memories of the individual subject, as if through music, including its loss, we might find a way to appreciate or listen for (without being able to grasp or appropriate) a subjectivity (in this case Marcy's) beyond ourselves. The possibility for true collectivity emerges, but not collectivity in the sense of the ahistorical project critiqued by Flinn, but a collectivity in Agamben's sense: realized as an openness to an experience whose temporal particulars are beyond our own limited experience, that we can variously relate to but never appropriate. It is to this, an awareness of pure otherness, what lies silent in the spaces of the city, something beyond and also prior to dreams, that Dybek wishes us to attend. Such silence has "the power to change whoever listen[s]" precisely because it emerges in the absence of existing conditions, including memory, and as such is purely utopian—without reference, without precedent. What Dybek is suggesting is that the condition for collectivity is, like that of music, one's capacity to dwell in abstraction, a pure sound so without reference to individualized, cultural or political meaning, that it is identical to or interchangeable with silence. True "change," then, is the willingness to attend to this horizon, to what is beyond it, as a kind of listening, a readiness, without necessarily hearing anything in a previously intelligible register, which would then confine it to past or present meaning.

This moment of listening is Dybek's clearest articulation of the utopia of process, the realization of a constantly changing, constantly emergent collectivity that is always responsive to the unforeseen "accidents" of a material reality that refuses to conform to the spaces and institutions we've prepared for it. As the narrator tells us, even when he no longer missed Marcy he could hear the "silence left behind" (33) as if memory is not just recalling what is remembered but the act of seeking what no longer resides there—the totally forgotten, the yet to be known. It is no accident that the narrator couches this in terms of miscegenation and music, in the departure from strictures (racial

purity) and standards (predefined ways of being and doing, whether racial or aesthetic) into complete surprise. In this sense, memory refuses instrumental "ends," refuses to abide in the way things are or even were, and reaches for spaces uncalled for. It is an optimistic, perhaps wildly optimistic, moment in which an audible music stops and an as yet inaudible music begins, one that demands attentiveness rather than discourse, and in which the basis of community is the recognition of Gladsky's prefix "trans" as the differentiating moment, that necessary meeting, that is the basis of an ethnic conclave in the first place. In this transient moment, when one is neither here nor there, neither determined by the past nor bound by a fatalistic future, Dybek's characters improvise their Chicago, a dreamscape city assembled and reassembled out of available sounds.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor W. *Essays on Music*. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002.

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

Bloch, Ernst. *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*. Trans. Peter Palmer. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.

Borshuk, Michael. "True Tales and 8 Mile Memoirs: Exploring the Imaginary City of Detroit." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41.1 (2008): 107-34.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.

Dybek, Stuart. *The Coast of Chicago*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.

Ellison, Ralph. "The Charlie Christian Story." *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1995. 233-40.

Flinn, Caryl. *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992.

Gladsky, Thomas. "From Ethnicity to Multiculturalism: The Fiction of Stuart Dybek." *Melus* 20.2 (1995): 105-18.

Jackson, Travis A. "'Always New and Centuries Old': Jazz, Poetry and Tradition as Creative Adaptation." *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. Eds. Robert G. O'Meally et al. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. 357-73.

Kenney, William Howland. *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

Marx, Karl. "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole." *Marx: Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Trans. Martin Milligan. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959. 111-32.

Nickel, Mike and Adrian Smith. "An Interview with Stuart Dybek." *Chicago Review* 43.1 (1997): 87-101.

Plath, James. "An Interview with Stuart Dybek." *Cream City Review* 15.1 (1991): 143-55.

Rossi, Aldo. *The Architecture of the City*. Trans. Diane Ghirardo & Joan Ockman. Cambridge: MIT, 1982.

Seaman, Donna. "A Conversation with Stuart Dybek." *TriQuarterly* 123 (2006): 15-25.

Wall, Thomas Carl. *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben*. New York: State University of New York P, 1999.